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Practitioner research in higher education as a means of creating professional knowledge  
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This paper looks at the issues surrounding practitioner research in higher education and its role in professional knowledge creation. It examines the nature of professional knowledge in the context of higher education and argues that practice-based research is a legitimate form of academic research. Academic work practices tend to be based on practical experience rather than research, and research conducted by practitioners tends to be aimed at improving practice rather than creating new knowledge. However, this paper explores the relationship between practice and research in the creation of ‘new’ knowledge, and uses examples from my own practitioner research as illustrations. It takes a social practice theory approach to knowledge and argues for a more research-led approach to teaching in higher education, as well as the removal of the distinction between the researcher and the practitioner in this field.

Research into educational practice is a growing field, with the role of practitioner researchers increasing. However, practitioner researchers in higher education are sometimes met with suspicion by both researchers and practitioners. Researchers tend to regard practice-based research as useful for improving teaching and learning, but as having little to contribute to new disciplinary knowledge. Alternatively, when discussing research with practitioners, the first question they tend to ask is, “ah, but how long is it since you were in the classroom?”

Tight links the expansion of higher education with the growth of research in that field, and he cites many examples of research into all aspects of educational practice. For instance, when discussing research into teaching in higher education he gives examples of what he terms “explicitly research-based studies of the teaching role” (Tight, 2003, p. 64) which present a strong practical approach and are conducted by practitioners. There is a need to find ways to integrate the roles of researcher and practitioner and to produce more collaborative research. Although practitioners have long been involved in case studies and action research, there is a suggestion that adopting a communities of practice approach to educational research could present “new ways of connecting what we know through research with what we do in …education” (Buysse, Sparkman and Wesley, 2003, p.2 65). Whatever form the research takes, the gap between research and practice is becoming blurred, and there is a growing body of credible research being produced by practitioner researchers, as Tight (2003) reveals. In this paper I discuss my own research into the development of professional academic knowledge from a social practice theory perspective, and attempt to show how it makes a relevant contribution to educational research.
However, I firstly address the question: If the purpose of research is to create ‘new’ knowledge, how far can practitioner research be said to do that? This brings us to the heart of the issue of researching educational practice, or indeed any practice. Research conducted by practitioners into their own practice is necessarily context-bound and subjective and is usually aimed at improving practice, and so it is debatable how far this can be called creation of new knowledge. This question highlights serious issues which face higher education today: what Scott calls the “epistemological crisis” (1995, p. 174) of higher education which questions the very nature of knowledge. Winter, Taylor and Sarros (as Scott did previously) question the “linear accumulation of knowledge” (2000, p. 35) in the light of the large-scale changes in higher education which reflect the political and social upheavals of the modern world. They interpret the current debate about what defines ‘knowledge’ as that which is “‘reliable’, ‘wise’ and ‘good’” and link these attributes through the concept of reflexivity, which calls into question the scientific objectivity on which traditional principles of research are based (Winter et al, 2000, p. 27).

Related to the current issues surrounding knowledge creation, this paper goes on to discuss the nature of professional knowledge in higher education. The discussion starts with a brief look at early research in this field (for example, Polanyi, 1966; Schon, 1987; Eraut, 1994, 2000). However, the main focus of the discussion is on social practice theories of knowledge, particularly its relational and social nature. For example, Wenger, McDermott and Snyder describe a community of practice as “a living repository of …knowledge” (2002, p. 10). Examples of academic work practices from my own research are used to illustrate this socially-created, practice-based view of professional learning and knowledge. The site of my research is an offshore campus of a western university in which academics are seen to engage in a process of informal, shared learning about their academic work.

Having discussed knowledge creation and professional knowledge within the context of higher education, this paper examines one of the main issues to consider when researching educational practice, which is the gap between research and practice. In education the roles of researcher and practitioner have tended to be separate. Hammersley describes the difference between research and practice in his “two-worlds theory” (2002, p. 61) whereby researchers and practitioners are said to occupy different worlds because they are engaged in fundamentally different activities. It is also the case that a lot of the practice of higher education is based on experience and prior knowledge rather than a research-informed knowledge base. To some extent this differentiation between research and practice is reinforced by universities in the way research is valued over the practice of teaching, which makes practitioner research into educational practice a contested issue, particularly in relation to its purpose and value.

On the other hand, it could be argued that the gap between research and practice is not so clear-cut, since research itself is a form of practice. The distinction between research which is aimed at the production of knowledge and that which is aimed at the improvement of practice is not always easy to make. Research conducted by practitioners can lead to the production of knowledge, even if the intention was to improve practice, albeit context-bound, tentative knowledge (Pring, 2000, p. 137).
Indeed, separating the theoretical from the practical in the sense of either being a researcher or a practitioner is questionable. From the social practice theory approach all human activity is a form of practice. As Wenger puts it, “the distinction between the theoretical and the practical…refers to distinctions between enterprises rather than fundamental distinctions in qualities of human experience and knowledge” (1998, p. 48). Thus, to separate the world of the researcher from that of the practitioner becomes an arbitrary distinction, and there is no reason why a practitioner cannot be a researcher as long as the standards of academic rigour apply. I demonstrate this point by discussing my own approach to maintaining academic rigour in my research, namely through a focus on issues of validity, credibility and ethical considerations.

(974 words)

References